

Culture, Community, Cosmos : Two Temple Orchestras of Tamil Nadu*

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In this paper¹, I shall attempt to suggest that classical music and dance traditions are, in a very real sense, social traditions. This is clearly seen in the cultural monopolies operating along lines of class, sex, and caste in the practice of particular artistic skills. The technical use of specific instruments in sanctioned contexts cannot be easily dissociated from general social privileges and taboos, even though the link between technology and society is more difficult to establish in the realm of art because of its perceived purely creative and representational character. Of course, the 'freedom' permitted to art is only a function of its market significance today, both as a public and private good, but it has served, very successfully, in obscuring from us the intricate nature of the linkage between 'making' and 'doing' or artistic and ethical activity in human life.

Like language, art both expresses and enables society—this very basic premise has become clouded in our perceptions because the pedagogic function of pleasure (embodied, even today, in acquired notions of 'distinction', 'taste', 'style', etc.) has lost out to its product function—an item to be 'consumed' by the individual or the mass. In the process, it has become increasingly difficult to establish the rootedness of the work of art in an entire life-world and not just a technical practice (Forsyth, 1966; Levi-Strauss, 1979; Bourdieu, 1996). While the truth of this is easily recognized in our everyday experience—the difficulty felt for instance in recognizing, let alone appreciating, the work of art from an 'other' class or culture—its demonstration proves more viable in the context of local variations within a shared cultural tradition.

With this in mind the paper will focus on two related temple-orchestra systems—the *periamelam* (lit. 'big drums' in Tamil) and the *chinnamelam* (lit. 'small drums' in Tamil)², which were traditionally the hereditary specializations of the Isai Vellala³, a politically powerful community of Tamil Nadu. The *periamelam* which was constituted of the Nagaswaram (a kind of oboe), the Tavil or 'big' outdoor drum, the Ottu (drone) and cymbals, was organized around the male Nagaswaram virtuoso. The *Chinnamelam* which was constituted of the Mukha-vina (a diminutive Nagaswaram), the Mridangam or 'small' concert drum, the Tutti (a bagpipe-type drone) and cymbals, was organized around the *devadasi* or female dancer (Srinivasan, 1984).

It will be a basic premise of this paper that in the past, the distinction of *periamelam*

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and chinamelam was not based on a simple sexual division of labour alone, demarcating instruments and symbols appropriate to 'men's work' on the one hand and 'women's work' on the other. Rather, the gender division of peria and chinna provided an entire cosmology linking god, (wo)man, and nature in the Tamil tradition of the auspicious temple theatre-arts. As a *mangala-vadya*, it is true, the Nagaswaram shared in the auspiciousness of the devadasi—the *nitya sumangali*. But this initial identity had very distinctive, formal—esthetic and conceptual—implications. In the technical speciality of their music, the composition of their personnel, the instruments used, and the modes of transmission deployed, the periamelam and the chinamelam were unique unto themselves and yet inextricably bound to one another.

Quite clearly, the overall community context within which each orchestra operated did not prevent a high degree of professional and artistic specialization—key attributes of classicism in any art tradition. The paper rejects, consequently, approaches to art history which ignore the embodiment of Indian aesthetic traditions in particular local and regional cultures. At the same time, it seeks to overcome the methodological barriers within anthropology which come in the way of understanding 'high' textual traditions in terms more familiar to the study of what have been considered 'folk' traditions (Dumont, 1957; Vatsyayan, 1979).

For the Isai Vellala themselves, art as a community function and a mode of livelihood ensured competence and continuity of practice. An extremely telling metaphor which they used to justify their claim to artistic superiority was that of the plantain (*vazai*) which kept perpetuating itself over the years from the original parent stock (*vazai-adi-vazai*). In like fashion, they felt it was the continuous propagation of their art which marked them apart from their cultural rivals, the Brahmins, who needed to depend on fortuitous circumstance for recruiting fresh talent. The Brahmins, it was further felt, dissipated their skills over a wider compass of artistic performances which was often of an amateur nature. The Isai Vellala on the other hand excelled in one and only one form of music in their search for excellence.

The role of the temple in this professional discipline was quite explicitly stated—a gifted individual might find it possible to excel in many arts but his rights to temple performance were restricted to only the one which was a hereditary monopoly. In their more lucid moments the Isai Vellala in fact linked their community's prestige and artistic expertise to the divine sanction of the sectarian and technical literature—the Saiva and Vaishnava Agamas (which deal with the performative sciences connected with temple religion) and the *Natyashastra* (dealing with the secular science of dramaturgy and deemed the Fifth Veda—for the enlightenment and entertainment of "the women and sudra"). It was the community's physical rootedness in a temple and its society, furthermore, which helped concentrate and develop skills. In the past, the clear physical boundaries of each temple community and its comparative immobility had indeed led to an intensification of social relations among the

artists to a very narrow spatial range. Areas comprising even as low as a fifteen-mile radius were mentioned. Most importantly, it had permitted a degree of aesthetic specialization within the community which was consciously in tune with the specific demands of temple ritual performance (Srinivasan, 1984).

The two orchestras—the periamelam and the chinamelam—were organized around the allied arts of Tamil *bhakti* worship: Sadir (dance), Nagaswaram (music), and *nattuvangam* (dance conduction), without which no major shrine could function in the past. Recruitment to each orchestra was restricted from within the group on the basis of various natural and cultural criteria such as (i) sex: the Nagaswaram was meant to be performed only by men while the Sadir, the classical solo dance of Tamil Nadu, was meant to be danced only by women; (ii) inheritance: 'shares' in the local service rights to the periamelam were transmitted through male links and to the chinamelam through female links; (iii) initiation: dedication to the deity, seen as a simple rite of incorporation for the men and as a special ceremony of 'marriage' for the women, marked entrance into the profession and was compulsory for the attainment of the privileges associated with temple office; and (iv) training: the public demonstration of skill in one's art subsequent to apprenticeship to one's teacher was the necessary preliminary to a professional career. Participation in each orchestra consequently required both technical and hereditary qualification.

The peculiar combination of both was particularly evident in the case of the chinamelam which demanded 'celibacy' on the part of the dancer by prohibiting her access to the *grihasta*⁴ way of life. (The male artists, on the other hand, could marry normally and combine their profession with private domesticity.) It was the temple which permitted a resolution of this contradiction: the ceremony of initiation into its service organization simultaneously declared a woman's availability for liaisons with secular patrons. By sanctioning the products of these mixed unions and giving them employment in its service organization, the temple permitted the perpetuation of achieved skills as a community or 'caste' vocation and monopoly. The requirement for both heredity and skill in temple positions presumed in fact a tightly-integrated community context. Self-sufficiency in the training and performance of skills heightened local group corporatism and professionalism through the internal organization of the population into specialist and lay sections. It was not enough to be born into the community; one had to be competent in order to gain rights to temple service. Just as it was difficult to be competent in the particular service unless born or adopted and resident in the community with its internal training facilities. Professional divisions such as peria and chinamelam reflected involution and greater sophistication of the artistic community under the influence of the *bhakti* temple institution. An examination now of the internal organization of the local groups associated with each aesthetic specialization will help to demonstrate this fact:

Periamelam

The periamelam services were provided by a patriarchal organization. The playing of the Nagaswaram, conceived of as male work, was supported by an orchestra whose members were also male and belonged very often to the same *pirambirai* (stock or kin group). Service rights to temple work were the property not of individuals but of local groups and were transmitted from father to son. Though the role of women was not denied in the perpetuation of the male line and hence of the art tradition, they were strictly kept out of the professional life of the group. In the Nagaswaram tradition, to teach a woman any art as an occupational interest was seen as a waste and loss since she would take the knowledge and the secrets out of the house when she married. Her possible success and fame would not in any way reflect back on the tradition which had made her. In keeping with their uniform domestic code, the women of the Nagaswaram tradition were seen as contributing to the *pirambirai* only as wives and mothers. The standard attempt to marry one's daughter to a star pupil reflected a strategy for re-generating the *pirambirai* through the consolidation of its artistic and generative resources. These kinds of marriages permitted a continuing hold over the student and his talents and the daughter and her offspring.

Conversely, one could seek to bring into the *pirambirai* women from outside who belonged to well-known art traditions, who as 'wives' would consolidate one's own artistic capital. The men of the Nagaswaram often said that they looked not just for a girl from a wealthy family but one from a gifted family when making matrimonial alliances. Money could come and go, and to marry a rich girl might not eventually leave anything to show for itself; but to exchange with families of talent yielded benefits in the long run—benefits which were much more permanent and lasting. It is significant that marriage with undedicated girls of the *chinnamelam* took place quite frequently whereas *periamelam* women were rarely given to *chinnamelam* men. The *periamelam* thereby set itself apart as the uniform 'clean' householding section of the community performing a 'pure' male art form.

Given its conservative attitude towards its women, the Nagaswaram group exhibited a patriarchal household tradition and ethic. Authority, both private and public, remained in the hands of men. Close-kin marriage alliances and functional cooperation in the common task of temple service knitted the *periamelam* households together into a community. The symmetry in the marital fate of the men and women and the uniform application of the gender ideology to all members of the group supported the overall harmonic character of the social organization. The *chinnamelam* services, on the other hand, were provided by a group that failed to combine its diverse features under a single, overarching ideology, whether matriarchal or patriarchal.

Chinamelam

In the dance organization both men and women participated publicly in the community art form but this was not uniform throughout the group. There was an asymmetry in the marital fate of community members which reflected back on the art organization—a section of women, the devadasis, were not intended for grihasta life. All men, on the other hand, could in theory marry and lead a 'normal' existence. The asymmetry and disharmony in the chinamelam social organization had aesthetic consequences.

Service rights in the local temple were the property of groups, not individuals, and passed from mother to daughter. It was a special class of women, the *tevaradiyal* or devadasis alone, who were eligible for the transmission of these professional privileges. A ceremony of 'marriage' to the local deity initiated them into temple service at the same time that it excluded them from the endogamous unit. They continued to reside instead in their natal households and entered into sexual liaisons with the local landed nobility that assumed a fairly formal and enduring character. The female offspring of these unions carried forward the art tradition. In contrast, the non-dedicated women (brothers' or sons' daughters as also those who, though in the direct line of matrilinear transmission, were excluded from the profession because of a lack of good looks or dancing abilities) married and formed part of their husbands' households. Often, they provided the vocal accompaniment to the dance. The men of the community, on the other hand, were uniformly permitted to marry and reside at their mothers' homes with wives and children. They specialized in dance-training or the orchestral accompaniment to the dance. If the performance was restricted to women, the conduction of the dance as also its teaching was in the control of men—the *nattuvanar*.

The dominance of women in the *dasi* household lent a certain complexity to the chinamelam social organization. How was for instance the *nattuvanar*, a dependent in his mother's or sister's household—to assert his authority vis-à-vis a female student? Normally this was achieved by ensuring that the student was from a distinct household. But with the achievement of a special renown, the *nattuvanar*'s subordinate position in his own home clearly led to an ambiguous situation. Given the strong authority of the female head of the household (the senior woman or *taikkizhavi*), any man with self-esteem would, it was considered, move out whenever possible and reign supreme in his own domain. There is no denying, of course, that only those men were able to pursue such an independent course of action whose excellence in the profession was particularly recognized and who were economically solvent. Financially, in fact, the man who set up on his own had much to gain since he was under no further obligation to pool his earnings with his mother and sisters. For the instrumentalist, residential separation alone could bring independent public status as a concert artist and not mere accompanist to women. For the dance guru, this was doubly true since he continued to be associated with women professionally.

Prominent dance teachers and conductors shared the limelight with the *dasi* at every stage of her professional career. As students, the *dasīs* feared and respected their *guru* and honoured and worshipped him at various rites of passage in their households which the *nattuvanar* was often called upon to witness. Even in community matters, it was often *nattuvanars* who, along with the *Nagaswaram* men, arbitrated disputes and supervised property divisions within individual households. The respect granted to the *nattuvanar* as a teacher and family *guru*, even leader, could not be accounted for however under any diffuse kinship or household obligation.

It was the access of the *devadasis* to community *gurus* (not husbands), particularly knowledgeable in the solo, graceful, female classical dance, which made the *Sadīr* tradition reap rich economic and aesthetic dividends. Members of the community often related the sophistication of their art as a concert item to the introversion of their tradition with respect to the teaching and management of the dance. It was of course a highly competitive and selective process by which especially talented men of the community developed, against all odds, a household or '*gharana*' tradition for themselves, independent of their illustrious women. Inevitably therefore for the community, the search for male self-sufficiency and excellence had spatial and social concomitants.

In purely numerical terms as well, the exclusion of a section of the women from marriage exchange led to a proportionate accumulation of unmarried men in the system. Adoption of female children, whether from within or without the community, did occur, but primarily for purposes of temple dedication, and so the problem remained. Thus, despite the overall preponderance of women in the *dasi* community noted in the early census reports, the men would be in 'excess' in terms of the number of marital partners available. The necessity therefore for brothers and sons to 'hang on' to their sisters and mothers was a function of their inability to marry, in the face both of female economic predominance and temple dedication within the community. This meant that those who did get to marry were favoured in one way or another—either through having wealthy female relatives who arranged on their behalf to 'get' a wife, or through their own professional success which made it possible for them to afford a wife. Clearly, the latter was more likely to lead on to residential independence. Marriage, consequently, when accompanied by the ability to move out of the mother's household and set up on one's own with wife and children, was a demonstration of decisive dominance within the community. It also reflected claims to purity and social status of a kind to which the *devadasis* could not by the very definition of their morality and life-style aspire (Srinivasan, 1996).

Nowhere was this more in evidence than in the marked tendency displayed by the more prestigious *nattuvanar* traditions not only to prohibit their girls a professional career but to withhold them from marrying into a *devadasi* family. Normally, the asymmetry of

professional exchanges within the dance tradition was balanced by the continuing reciprocity of marriage exchange between the men and (undedicated) women. A household, furthermore, might stand in a student relation to some and a guru relation to others. The chances of permanent structural asymmetry within the dance organization were in this way obviated. The closure, consequently, and aggravated specialization displayed by the more prominent guru traditions was seen by many members of the community as having become counterproductive for the art. According to them, such extreme professionalism made it unprofitable for the girls to dance. The accumulation of wealth and power in a few hands destroyed community and its give-and-take⁵. The conservatism and exclusivism of the male dance-gurus was more than evident in the close resemblance between the composition and structure of their households and those of the Nagaswaram players described earlier. There were, however, two major differences: (i) as a form of domestic arrangement, the nattuvanar household was not uniform throughout the devadasi community; and (ii) it did enter into professional alliances with other households involving women.

The instability and heterogeneity of the chinna⁶melam's residential arrangements was matched by the ethical hiatus between married and unmarried female codes, performative (female) and managerial (male) power. The rather specialized and self-conscious separation of the male teaching and control function within a female performing art led to a fundamental structural ambivalence in the chinna⁶melam social organization which was at variance with the more homogeneous social context of the periamelam. What is significant to our purpose, however, is that the mediating grid of peria and chinna did not operate at the level of community existence alone but permeated the very structure—instrumental and performative—of the art organization itself. As the table comparing the chinna and periamelam indicates (p. 10 and 11), gender variations of male and female were evident not merely in the instruments—human and material—deployed in the two orchestras, but also in the artistic techniques and modes of transmission practised.

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The peria and chinna classification examined above, in society and performative art, is only one example of the tremendous extensivity of meaning achieved by gender in the Tamil cultural context. Indeed, by the sixth century onwards, a wave of Hindu bhakti had given the erotic, aesthetic domain theological significance. Haloed theatrical conventions of man-woman relations in poetry and drama, music and dance—such as the *nayaka-nayaki bhava*⁶—were now deployed in the ritual domain, making it more popular and pleasing. Community orchestras like the periamelam and chinna⁶melam were brought into the temple service organization as part of these larger developments, to perform either at

Comparison of the Periamelam and Chinamelam

Periamelam		Chinamelam	
Instrument	Quality of Music	Instrument	Quality of Music
<i>Nagaswaram</i> Reed woodwind Mouth-blown Large (2 ½-foot long) Outdoor instrument	Loud tone Low, deep pitch 2 ½-octave compass Unsuited for accompaniment	<i>Mukhavina</i> Reed woodwind Mouth-blown Small (10-inch long) Concert (indoor) instrument	Soft tone High, shrill pitch 1 ½-octave compass Suited for accompaniment
<i>Tavil</i> Wooden drum Played with sticks Large and high Outdoor instrument	Loud tone Nagaswaram accompaniment only	<i>Mridangam</i> Wooden drum Played with wrist, hands Elongated, narrow Concert (indoor) instrument	Fine tone Standard concert accompaniment (vocal, dance, instrumental)
<i>Ottu</i> Reed woodwind Mouth-blown	Drone accompaniment for Nagaswaram only	<i>Tutti/Sruti-petti</i> Bellows-type wind (mouth- blown/mechanical)	Drone accompaniment for concerts
<i>Talam</i> Metal cymbals Both bronze, flat and heavy	Nagaswaram accompaniment Dull beat	<i>Talam</i> Metal cymbals One bronze (large, flat) One silver (small, concave)	Dance accompaniment Staccato beat
Breath	Pure melody	Voice	Lyrical accompaniment to dance; verse and melody in sustained balance

Human Composition and Organization

Periamelam	Chinamelam
• Male band focused on the male Nagaswaram virtuoso • Two Nagaswaram artists minimal, duplicating each other's art • Mechanical solidarity (simple hierarchy) between members: — performative and control functions centralized — rivalry and competition between Nagaswaram and Tavil artists — multiplication of principal performers possible	• Male and female band focused on female dancer • Solo performance by dancer, conducted by guru-musician • Organic solidarity (permanent hierarchy) between members: — performative (dancer) and control (dance-conductor) functions dichotomized — authority and dependence between nattuvanar and dasi — multiplication of principal/performers absent but pairing possible

Aesthetic Attributes and Functions

Perlamelam	Chinamelam
• <i>Sangeeta</i> genre • Accompaniment to god (unsuited for human accompaniment) • Plays first at all ritual periods of temple worship • Performs generalized functions of honour at coronations and goddess festivals • At festivals: <i>Vira</i> (heroic, vigorous) <i>rasa</i> or 'flavour' predominates Special compositions — Mallari and Natai — and martial music (pure melody, no lyrics) initiate processions Alarippu (prelude) to god's arrival on streets, played by Taval and Talam Plays on all four streets except small section of East Street when it is silent and dasis sing	• <i>Sahitya</i> and <i>sangeeta</i> genre • Accompaniment to dancer only • Plays at evening ritual period of worship alone • Never plays for goddess or 'rival' and plays only when dance honours are being provided to the god • At festivals: <i>Sringara</i> (sensual, sweet) <i>rasa</i> or 'flavour' predominates Special compositions of songs, voiced rhythmic syllables (<i>solukkattu</i>) accompany procession Melaprapti (prelude) to dancer's arrival on streets played by Mridangam and Talam Plays only on East Street at the start and finish of god's perambulation of temple

Modes of Artistic Transmission: The Gurukulam

Periamelam	Chinamelam
• Teaching relation based on hierarchy of age and skill between two men • Asymmetry between guru and student restricted to training period • Definite termination of apprenticeship period with guru • The <i>vidwan</i> independent of guru and capable of 'replacing him' • Bonds of likeness (mechanical solidarity) predominate	• Teaching relation based on hierarchy of function, age, and skill between men and women • Asymmetry in guru-student relation permeates entire dancing career • Lifelong control of guru over student through dance conduction even after <i>arangetram</i> which marks the end of apprenticeship • Senior dancer (taikkizhavi) cooperates with and does not 'replace' guru • Bonds of likeness and difference (organic solidarity) predominate

the daily/festival honours (*upachara/seva*) offered to the god; or as accompaniments to the theatre of his exploits celebrated in the temple⁷.

The nayaka now became easily identified as the Hero-God—the singular and unified ‘legal personality’ who was owner of the new temple corporation—the *srikovil* or ‘structural temple’—materially and metaphysically quite distinct from the roadside or private family shrine. The Goddess, on the other hand, became split as per theatrical convention into the *svakiya-nayika* or divine consort, housed in the same shrine as the Hero-God, and the *parakiya-nayika* or ‘other woman’, in dynamic integration and opposition to the former.

From the eighth century onwards, this fundamental heterogeneity in goddess representations found concrete archaeological expression in the building of a separate shrine to the goddess within the enclosure of the *srikovil*, close to but not identified with the Hero-God. The theological and theatrical inclusion of the *parakiya-nayika* into the worship calendar of the *srikovil* simultaneously legitimated the recruitment of hundreds of *devadasis*—human embodiments of the ‘other’ love, which *bhakti* is also made of—into its service organization. As auspicious orchestras both the *periamelam* and *chinnamelam* participated in the theatre of temple worship, but it is not difficult to see how the former’s music would be more adequate to express the powerful and unified, energetic presence of the nayaka or Hero-God; while the latter’s music would be more adequate to express the variety of ideas, actions, and emotions appropriate to the nayaki or Heroine in relation to the Hero-God.

As the embodiment of relationality *per se*, the “infinite variety” of possibilities for enacting the nayaki or female persona in comparison to the male persona or nayaka has been noted in the early dramaturgical texts by many scholars, and has been related directly, in Tamil Sangam poetics, to the theoretical classification of genres into *akam* and *puram*—the erotic and the heroic. The Feminine belongs more authentically to the former convention because flux and variety is the very stuff the domain of love and intimacy between man and woman is made of. Just as the masculine belongs more authentically to the latter, conventionalized as the inflexible and steadfast public domain of martyrdom and war (Raghavan, 1963; Higgins, 1993; Ramanujan, 1996; Srinivasan, 1984; Stein, 1978). In the context of temple *bhakti* the *periamelam* played to represent the auspiciousness of the macrocosmic, awe-inspiring, and venerable love due to god as a leader (reminiscent of the *puram* genre); while the *chinnamelam* played to represent in all its microcosmic variety the auspiciousness of intimate and interpersonal love due to god as a lover (reminiscent of the *akam* genre).

The revolutionary nature of the relationship established between religion, civil society, and classical art forms in South Indian temple Hinduism received theological justification from the Agamas and Pancharatra texts of course (Srinivasan, 1984). But at the societal level, it was the radicalization of gender relations which provided an impetus for the same.

Ordinarily, specialist caste populations display a fundamental heterogeneity within the group between those men and women who are adepts and those who are lay, between those who practice and those who do not. In the case of the Isai Vellala, however, the requirement for temple dedication in the case of the dance skill developed these general community classifications in a special way. Within the female population itself a more 'sectarian' differentiation of 'celibate' and householding sections emerged that was a function of the general distinction between the skilled and the unskilled members of the total caste population. At the same time, to complicate matters even further, the dancer's sexual code did not proscribe seeking an elite patron from outside the temple group and bearing children for the community. Skill and heredity consequently continued to be linked in the woman's profession despite the rule of obligatory celibacy. For the men, on the other hand, distinction between the skilled and the unskilled did not in any way reflect on their marital status—all being permitted to marry. The coexistence of two opposed ethics for the women of the community—the conjugal and the professional—reflected back on the social organization in interesting ways.

Firstly, it permitted a diversity of skills to develop within the artist community which marked it as more than a 'caste'. Two, if not three, distinct professions were attributed to its name. At the same time, however, it qualified as less than a 'caste' since it was not multifunctional in a diffuse sense. The community members only performed specialized functions and on specific occasions. Both these facts distinguished the community from a group such as the barbers who performed many tasks such as serving as messengers, surgeons, drummers, in addition to their "attributional" task of barbering. Secondly, it permitted the professional virtuosity of the community to match the growing sophistication of temple worship along aesthetic (erotic) lines. The organic integration of male and female functions within the chinnamelam tradition had served economic interests by improving the dance as a concert art. Now the specialization in the male (the periamelam) and female (the chinnamelam) branches of bhakti musical traditions served the entire community's interests in their status as pure and high temple servants. The periamelam and chinnamelam were employed in the temple-ritual process and in the ceremonial life of the community in accordance with nayaka (hero)-nayaki (heroine) theatrical conventions which form the core of Tamil bhakti worship and its theology. They communicated their roles effectively not only by the unique aesthetic ingredients of their music but also by belonging to distinctive, appropriate ways of life.

The devadasi stood at the root of a rather unique and specialized temple artisan caste, which displayed in its internal organization the operation of pragmatic, competitive and economic considerations encouraging sophisticated professional artistic activity. The innovations introduced into the community through the fact of independent female skills contrasted well with the more conservative male profession which was also poorer economically. Most of the Nagaswaram artists remarked on the greater wealth, fame and

glamour that had been possible for the dancing girls as compared to themselves. Significantly, they claimed this to be the result of an unfair advantage arising out of the natural attraction of women. According to them, the temple authorities used to give the dance pre-eminence at festivals knowing the people would flock to see the devadasis. The devadasis were certainly permitted privileges and honours and a physical closeness to the deity denied to the men of their community. What is significant to our purpose here is that in the context of an otherwise shared community culture where the dance 'people' and the Nagaswaram 'people' lived, worked, and married together, it was the altered gender equation which instituted competitiveness and social change. The abstract sectarian truths of Sankhya Hinduism which see the male element as passive or static/homogeneous and the female as active or dynamic/diverse, in their cosmologies, appeared here to receive confirmation on the technical and cultural plane.

NOTES

1. The field research for this paper was carried out towards my doctoral degree at Cambridge University in the late 1970s and early 1980s and was focused primarily on the Tanjavur district of Tamil Nadu.
2. 'Peria' and 'chinna' are pervasive categories in Tamil society and reflect seniority and juniority or temporality, not necessarily rank. Thus the periamelam was anterior and played 'before' chinamelam, which played 'after' in all temple ceremonies.
3. Isai Vellala is an honorific title adopted by the community in 1948 to overcome the scandal associated with their women, the devadasis. It literally means music (land) lords. Recognized as a backward caste, the Isai Vellala became powerful in the DK and DMK movements. Leaders like Karunanidhi are members of this community.
4. In Hindu society grihasta refers to householding life based on the sacrament of marriage between a man and a woman; and all the duties and privileges that flow from that fact. Thus, as we shall see, the devadasi was certainly part of a household but not one based on grihasta goals and aspirations for women.
5. A guru could extract sometimes as much as fifty per cent of a devadasi's earnings all through her dancing career; besides, he was the recipient of gifts of cloth and gold and paddy at various festive occasions or rites of passage (Srinivasan, 1996).
6. The nayaka-nayaki classification dates as far back as Bharata's *Natyashastra*, the oldest available text in Sanskrit on Indian dramaturgy. Later texts such as Dhananjaya's *Dasarupa* (10th century) elaborate the classification even further (Higgins, 1993).
7. The utilization of the nayaka-nayaki convention was evident in the drama of daily and festival worship where the *amman* (goddess) participated as the rival of the god's consort, who was housed in the same building as him. The theatrical set of the hero and the two kinds of heroine, the *svakiya* and the *parakiya* nayika, now applied to the images themselves—'actors' in their own worship.

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